

From the Consul's Desk: U.S. Student Visas

The recent release of 10+2 class results has many students and parents contemplating plans for higher education, as are recent graduates of degree programs and professionals seeking growth. What should they study, where, at what cost and for what benefit?

These issues are considered over months and years, with the help of test scores (SAT, ACT, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, USMLE) that help narrow options for the student, applying for and gaining acceptance into a specific program at an institution, and gathering the means to finance the course of study. Education in the U.S. is a reasonable and exciting option for many families. This includes education at vocational and general academic institutions for undergraduate and graduate degrees. (See: <http://www.namastestudyusa.com/> and <http://educationusa.state.gov/home>). There are about 950,000 foreign students in the U.S., of whom about 10% are from India. The 94,000 Indian students constituting the single largest foreign student contingent in the U.S.

Applying for a student visa is a key element of preparing for study in the U.S. What is a student visa? It is a sticker in your passport, authorizing you to travel to the U.S. for study there, and is valid for a specific duration. The process to obtain the visa is relatively simple. Applicants educate themselves about the visa application and interview process, getting reliable, official information free at <http://www.uscis.gov/> (search for "student visa"), http://chennai.usconsulate.gov/student_f1_visas.html and <http://www.vfs-usa.co.in/> . They then compile the relevant information and documents; and obtain an appointment for the interview through the VFS website.

On the appointed day and time, the applicant appears at the consulate with all the relevant documents and information, where their documents are processed and readied for interview. The applicant is interviewed by a consular officer, and is immediately given a decision on the application. The interview lasts a few minutes. The vast majority of genuine, credible students are granted visas and receive their passport back within a week. There is a segment of students who are given a temporary refusal which can turn into an issuance after the review by the consular officer of specific information or evidence. Because some applicants must be temporarily refused pending administrative processing that takes some weeks or months, students are advised to apply early, though not more than 120 days before the start of their program in the U.S.

So what can one do to prepare for the visa interview? Be natural at the interview: think of the interview as a conversation you might have with someone you meet on a train. If you have spent the time to think through what you want to study in the U.S., why, where, how you will pay for it, and what you might do after your studies, the interview will be a simple conversation of a few minutes. The officer may examine your documents (SEVIS fee receipt, degree certificates, mark sheets, test scores, I-20, financial papers, other relevant evidence) and will advise you of the decision.

On the other hand, if you offer vague, incomplete, memorized answers, you may not be found to be a credible or convincing student and could be refused. Worse yet would be the situation where you rely on unscrupulous consultants and present fake documents (degree certificates and mark-sheets, fake test scores, bank documents, etc.). In the latter case, you could be arrested, and potentially be barred for life from entry into the U.S.

The U.S. remains a magnet for motivated, enterprising students from all over the world who want to take advantage of its reputable, merit-based educational system. Their investment? Time, labor and fees for studies. Their returns? The student gets invaluable education at a top-notch institution, and accompanying opportunities for exploration and growth.

U.S. Consulate General: <http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>